

SARAH MCINTYRE'S
GUIDE TO HOSTING AUTHOR VISITS
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Getting an author to visit your school, library or festival is a brilliant way to inspire kids to read and fire up their creativity. I find a lot of kids don't really understand that the name on a book cover is a real person. (It's not some sort of box with a button that you push, and out comes a book.) And when they can see right in front of them that a writer or illustrator is a person who walks and talks and laughs and gets excited about stories, and occasionally makes mistakes, they get an inkling of possibilities: *Hey, maybe this is something I could do, too!*



It's so much more exciting to read a book by someone they've met. And if they get hooked on a story or two by that author, they may go on to read books by other authors, and it can open up to them a lifetime of reading and enjoying books and stories. But any author will tell you that **it's the host's preparation that can make all the difference between a wildly successful visit and one that make much less impact.**

During the past few years, I've picked up a few things that could be helpful if you're thinking of

organising your own Author Visit. (And when I say 'author', that can mean a writer or illustrator, they've both authors of creative work.)

* **Book as far in advance as you can.** If you're hoping to book an author for World Book Day, you'll need to add in extra time, possibly a whole year. Alternatively, you can organise a school book day on another day and have a much better chance of getting an author, particularly at shorter notice.

* **Expect to pay your author.** You get paid; they should, too. Remember an hour-long school event still can mean several hours of travel, possibly an overnight stay if the author's coming a long way, preparation time, time away from their regular work, being tired the following day, and the inevitable follow-up head cold.

You can read a good article by Nicola Morgan on author visit fees here:
<http://awfullybigblogadventure.blogspot.co.uk/2013/09/whats-author-event-worth-by-nicola.html>

* **Discuss book sales in advance.** Book sales are important: if kids get excited about an author and a particular book, it makes perfect sense to put that book into their hands right away so they can read it. A signed book may be something they treasure for their whole lives and it will remind them of the visit. Also, it helps the author to carry on doing their job; publishers don't have a lot of patience for slow sales and will drop authors quickly.

John Dougherty's written a good article about books sales here:
<http://awfullybigblogadventure.blogspot.co.uk/2014/03/the-reasons-for-signing-john-dougherty.html>

* **Discuss event format.** Authors are all different; some will prefer working with large assemblies and some will want smaller workshops. You can negotiate over e-mail or by phone with them what kind of sessions will work best with the room sizes and school timetable.

* **Display your children's work.** Kids get way more excited about doing something creative if they know their efforts will go up on the walls, not stuffed into a desk and forgotten. If you do this well before the author visits, it will create a good creative atmosphere. (Most teachers do this, but I've visited a few schools with no work on the walls at all.)

* **Don't worry about CRB checks.** Unless the author is doing long-term work with the group, or one-on-one sessions, this isn't legally necessary and takes up a lot of time and money. A good reference is much more valuable.

* **Prepare your kids.** If you whip up excitement in advance, kids will pay far, far more attention on the day and come away much more inspired than if they come into the auditorium wondering, *who is this person, some eccentric supply teacher?* Set projects based on the author's work. Perhaps create a wall area featuring the author, with photos, book covers, illustrated characters, things the kids have researched about him or her and written or drawn. Let your author know in advance that you've done a project, so the author can tailor their presentation to something more in-depth than a basic introduction to the books. (They will have to assume no one has read the books unless you tell them otherwise.)

* **Check out the author's website.** Besides being good research, he or she may have materials you can use in advance or as follow-up to the session.

* **Come up with a good system for book purchases.** Don't expect kids to remember to bring money on the day, have a good pre-order system in place. Your kids WILL want books after a good author visit, and it's a shame to let them down.

* **Get in touch.** Contact the author at least two weeks before the event to pin down any final details. Be sure the author has:

- Your contact name and number; also a contact name and number for the person who's collecting him or her from the station if it's not you
- If the author is driving, supply information about parking
- Expected arrival time
- Schedule of events with group sizes and age groups, including book signings, breaks and lunch time
- Any further details about book sales

Ideally, all this information should all go on a sheet of paper that the author can print out, so they don't have to piece together lots of different information in e-mails, possibly missing an important detail.

* **Think about photos.** Clear in advance which kids can appear in them: it's great to have a photo of the author with some of your children, perhaps holding up work they've done during the visit. Photos can be useful for the school website, newsletter, perhaps to print and hang up in the class as a reminder of the visit. Decide who's going to take the photos.

* **Local media:** do you want to alert them? It's good publicity for the school and the author!

* **Assess your supplies:** White board, flip chart or visualiser? Remember that if you invite an illustrator to draw on your interactive white board, you won't have original artwork to keep and pin up on the wall; it never looks as good printed out. If the author uses a flip chart, the pictures they draw will be large, like posters; if a visualiser, you may get notebook-sized drawings. Consider the size of the room: a flip chart can be hard to see from the back of a large auditorium, whereas with a visualiser, you can enlarge the image on-screen.

* **Buy new marker pens.** Every author knows the feeling of discovering on-stage that a pen's a dud. Three test swipes of a used pen won't always reveal which ones will work for more than a minute. An author visit is a big deal; invest in a pack of new markers, they don't cost that much. Make sure you have enough flip chart paper if the author wants a flip chart, and check that the flip chart stand isn't broken.

* **Check your tech.** If the author has a Powerpoint presentation, try to download it at least a few days in advance and test that it works on the school machines. If you're swapping between Powerpoint and a visualiser, make sure it works. If you're getting the presentation from them on the day (on a USB stick?), be sure you leave enough time for setup before events.

* **Arrange lifts.** Makes sure that, if the author is coming by train, that someone meets them at the station and brings them to the school. There's nothing more dispiriting to an author to start their day trudging through the rain, any supplies they've brought getting soaked, and being late because they can't find the right entrance.

* **Make the author feel welcome right away.** Be sure the front receptionist knows the author is coming, and knows their name when they greet them.

* **Be a guide.** Make sure someone's always around to help the author navigate the staff room, lunch room, setting up Powerpoint, etc, finding the toilet. Staff rooms can be very intimidating places!

* **Take part in whatever the author is doing with the kids.** Kids take their cue from their teachers: when they see their teachers taking part, they take the activity much more seriously. The worst thing teachers can do is chat in the back, or ignore the author and mark papers. And it's illegal to leave the author alone in the room with the children (It's sad that this law has to exist, but it's also a boon for visiting authors, whom I've heard sometimes used to get abandoned while teachers went out for cigarette breaks!)

* **Remember that authors aren't teachers.** While authors pick up techniques with practice, they're not actually trained in crowd control. You and your teaching assistants need to keep a close eye on the kids at all time, particularly the ones you know might have special needs.

* **Have a book signing system.** If an author is signing hundreds of books, have someone go through the queue, find out who the children want the book dedicated to (usually themselves, but sometimes a sibling or friend). Write the dedication name on a post-it note and stick it to the book. Then the author won't get the spelling wrong, or have to wait for the nervous child to spell out slowly his or her name phonetically.

* **Help out at the signing.** Make sure the author isn't mobbed while signing. If the author is signing lots of books; he or she may not have time or energy to sign little bits of paper, which will probably get crammed into rucksacks and lost. Don't make the author be the bad guy refusing to sign things; ask the author what he or she prefers, then let the kids know what they can expect.

* **Flowers aren't necessary.** If your authors are traveling by train, don't thank them with a flower arrangement that will be cumbersome to carry at rush hour. Instead of budgeting for a gift, just pay the extra into their fee. The author can use that money to buy a drink (or help toward the rent).

* **Follow up the visit!** Think about ways of following up the visit. Did the author set the kids a challenge? Is there a theme you could take up for a more in-depth project?

* **Keep the paperwork simple.** Do everything you can to keep the author from having to fill out reams of forms after the visit. (I've occasionally been given up to 50 sheets of paper to go through, including detailed questions about pension schemes!)

Don't be scared off by the sheer number of tips I've given you! Most of these are common sense things, but teachers and librarians are busy people, and it can help to run through a checklist. **Remember, a good Author Visit is one of the best gifts you can give your children, and the effects of it may last a lifetime.**

Check out **Nicola Morgan's Ten Top Tips for an Author Visit:**

<http://www.nicolamorgan.com/heartsong-blog/ten-tips-for-author-event-organisers/>

And another great post she's done for authors from the point of view of the organiser:

<http://awfullybigblogadventure.blogspot.co.uk/2013/01/author-events-from-other-side-by-nicola.html>

And you can learn more about Author Visits over on the **Society of Authors** website:

<http://www.societyofauthors.org/guides-and-articles>